
What Are the Similarities and Differences? A Comparison of the Turkish and Alberta Social Studies Curricula in Terms of Their Basics

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Abstract

In this essay, the authors try to make a panoramic comparison of the two countries' social studies curricula in light of their basics. Comparing the Alberta and Turkish social studies curricula within the historical perspective aims to reveal the similarities and differences of the two curricula in terms of their basic elements, such as definitions, visions, general structures, learning strands and the role of social studies. To do so, the authors examine a question: Why do the two curricula have similarities and differences? The documents show that there are some basic similarities and differences in the curricula, which is considered to be due to their historical roots. Document analysis, which is one qualitative research method, was conducted in the research. In conclusion, the two curricula are examined and recommendations are given for curriculum developers and authorities to reach a broader perspective.

Introduction

Turkish social studies education made a major change in 2005, to what was called a constructivist approach according to the global trends in education literature. This affected the basics of the curriculum in a radical manner. The new curricular document was introduced to the fourth and fifth elementary school level in 2004, then to the sixth and seventh level in 2005; the reform movement continued in the high school curricula. Some might wonder how the politicians and the ministry of national education administration came to this idea of great change.

According to Akşit (2007), the main reason for policymakers to execute such a comprehensive curricular reform was the fairly pessimistic view of the overall quality of the Turkish education system outlined in international assessment programs such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). Another important reason behind these reforms in the field of education in Turkey is the overall reformist tendency observed in government policy in order to join the European Union. This also

has been the case with all fields of education in terms of curriculum changes throughout the country (Öztürk 2011).

However, critics from many different perspectives bombarded the curricular reform. The curriculum reform was mostly welcomed by teachers, education scholars and the general public (Öztürk 2011, 114), yet many teachers and students were lost in the curriculum activities that they were not used to doing before.

According to Açıklalın (2011), after the implementation of the new social studies curricula in primary and secondary schools, new concerns were raised. These concerns were mostly focused on modelling other countries' social studies curricula, primarily that of the United States. It was very clear that the new social studies curriculum is very similar to the social studies curriculum being implemented in the United States (Eğitim-Sen 2005; EPPK 2006; Şimşek 2009; Açıklalın 2011). This should not be seen as a negative, because modelling and using experiences and examples from other countries in the process of preparing a new curriculum are necessary and helpful.

Canadian social studies educators claim that Canadian curriculum was strongly influenced by American trends that were impossible to avoid (Clark 2004, 17; Gibson 2012, 38–39). Therefore, the American effect in Canadian social studies curricula can be easily seen. In light of the above information, it is seen that both Turkish and Canadian social studies are highly influenced by American approaches. As writers, when we came to Canada for our post-doctoral studies, one of our goals was to examine the Canadian social studies curriculum. When we started to examine it more deeply, we realized that Turkey and Canada had similar social studies curricula in terms of definitions, visions, general structures, learning strands and the role of social studies in the curricula.

This research aims to contribute to the research literature. It will help educators gain different perspectives in order to transfer good applications between the two countries, understand differences and similarities between the two curricula, and to increase the awareness of curriculum developers and educational authorities.

In this context, the overall objective of this research is to ascertain the differences and similarities that Turkey and Canada–Alberta have in the social studies curricula at primary and secondary school levels (in terms of definitions, visions, general structures, learning strands and the role of social studies).

With reference to theoretical background, this document analysis research will explore also the following questions:

1. Are the Turkish and Alberta social studies curricula comparable and do they have similarities and differences in terms of the curriculum documents?
2. If the two curricula were highly influenced by American social studies trends, then how can we describe the situation?

For each attainment target in the curriculum of both countries, the elements were assessed as broader, similar and narrower and an overall judgment was made.

Research Method

The research method used in this study is qualitative document analysis, which is an appropriate method for gathering information when studying official documents. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which the documents are interpreted by researchers to deepen understanding of the topic of investigation. This qualitative research was conducted in steps. First, the essential and core content in the main areas of both curricula were selected and arranged in an order to facilitate comparison. Then, the content areas of the body of both curricula were selected and displayed according to the subareas expressed earlier in the research problems. These countries/regions were chosen because the researchers could easily access documents and had some familiarity with both countries' social studies education systems. The method of sampling is goal oriented.

Findings

Subtitles in this section explain the topic of each comparison mentioned above. Some systematic differences between the Turkish and Alberta social studies curriculum are identified below.

The Definitions

In the Turkish social studies curriculum document, the definition of social studies is

a primary school lesson whose main purpose is to help promote the individual performance in a certain social existence; and which consists of social sciences such as history, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, political science, and law topics and

civics; which are organized under certain learning strands; and in which the interaction of human with social and physical environment in the past, present and future is studied. (Ministry of National Education [MoNE] 2005a)

As can be seen from the formal definition, Turkish social studies, which is highlighted as a primary school course, contains history and geography as the major social sciences. In addition to the major social sciences, social studies cover other social sciences such as economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and political science. Also, non-scientific studies like “law topics and civics” imply its broad content. All of these show its interdisciplinary structure. The curriculum is built around the learning strands, units and themes. Humans’ social and physical environments were also stated in the curriculum within the context of past, present and future.

The Alberta social studies curriculum document defines social studies as follows:

Social studies is the study of people in relation to each other and to their world. It is an issues focused and inquiry-based interdisciplinary subject that draws upon history, geography, ecology, economics, law, philosophy, political science and other social science disciplines. (Alberta Education 2005, 1)

As can be seen from the definition of the curriculum, history and geography are the primary foci, coming before all other social science disciplines. Social studies is stated as a subject of study of people and their relationship. One of the prominent elements of the definition is “issues focused and inquiry-based interdisciplinary subject.”

The Comparison of the Two Definitions

As the initial phase of comparison work, we attempted to match the formal definitions from the comparison countries/regions by using both government-developed guidebooks. The Turkish curriculum calls itself a “primary school course,” while the Alberta one calls itself a “study.” The important point here is the Alberta curriculum’s statement that “social studies is the study of people in relation to each other and to their world,” which indicates that social studies is not just a course, as mentioned in the Turkish definition, but more than that. The issues-focused and inquiry-based features are considered significant in terms of modern-day curriculum design theory. This point seems missing in the Turkish definition and is an important deficiency that the curriculum developers should address. As well as the differences between

the curricula, there are many similarities between them, such as social sciences disciplines consisting mostly of history and geography.

The Vision Statements

In the Turkish social studies curriculum document, the vision of social studies is

to educate the citizens of the Republic of Turkey, who embraced and adopted the Ataturk’s contemporary principles and reforms in the 21st century, who comprehend the history and culture of Turkey, and are equipped with the basic democratic values and respect for human rights, and are sensitive to the environment, based on their experiences to interpret the information in the context of social and cultural construct, use and edit (critical thinker, creative, decision maker) the advanced skills of social participation, gain the methods used by social scientists [to] produce scientific knowledge, have an active social life, are productive, know their rights and responsibilities. (MoNE 2005a)

When the vision statement of the social studies curriculum is examined, the most remarkable point is seen to be to educate Turkish republic citizens who embraced and adopted Ataturk’s principles and a Kemalist perspective. Kemalism, also known as Ataturkism, defines political, social, cultural and religious reforms in Turkish history. Kemalism embodies secular and modern properties in the fulfillment of many political goals of European modernity. It emphasizes *active*, *productive* and *responsible* traits as well as many other personal characteristics of a Turkish citizen. It also emphasizes knowledge of history, respect for human rights and democratic principles, sensitivity to the environment, information interpretation and practice, as well as using thinking skills to educate students.

Below is the vision of social studies in the Alberta social studies curriculum document:

The Albertan Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12 Program of Studies meets the needs and reflects the nature of 21st century learners. It has at its heart the concepts of citizenship and identity in the Canadian context. The program reflects multiple perspectives, including Aboriginal and Francophone, that contribute to Canada’s evolving realities. It fosters the building of a society that is pluralistic, bilingual, multicultural, inclusive and democratic. The program emphasizes the importance of diversity and respect for differences as well as the need for social cohesion and the

effective functioning of society. It promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance in students as they engage in active and responsible citizenship at the local, community, provincial, national and global level. (Alberta 2005, 1)

As can be seen, central to the vision of the Alberta curriculum is the recognition of the diversity, perspectives and pluralism of Canadian society. Also emphasized are Canadian social structure, Aboriginal heritage, multicultural realities and Canada’s official bilingualism.

The Comparison of the Two Vision Statements

From the above statements, it is clear that both curricula have been making efforts to enhance future learners in social studies courses. When the two curricula are examined, there are both differences and similarities that attract attention. Both vision statements focus on their country’s expectations for younger generations in the direction of future citizenship education. The Alberta social studies curriculum spans kindergarten to Grade 12, whereas the Turkish social studies curriculum covers from fourth to seventh grades (which is not stated in the vision statement of Turkish curriculum). While the Turkish vision is based on Kemalist reforms and republican principles, the Alberta curriculum is based on diversity, perspectives and multiculturalism. Equally, both visions focus on preparing students for the 21st century. As that is an essential item, it should be in the vision statement. Moreover, the vision statements show the countries/regions’ sociocultural structure and historical roots as well as future expectations. In fact, the two countries’ vision statements clearly reflect what they want their citizens to do for their countries in the future.

The General Structures of the Two Curricula

The Turkish social studies curriculum document sets out the structure of social studies as shown in Figure 1.

The overall structure of the Turkish social studies curriculum starts with general and specific aims and goes through skills, values, concepts, learning strands, units and expectations, as can be seen above. In other words, the expectations compose units, units compose learning strands and each learning strand includes different skills, values and concepts in the curriculum.

The Alberta social studies curriculum document sets out the structure of social studies as shown in Figure 2.

The structure of the Alberta social studies curriculum starts with citizenship and identity and goes through skills and values, knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes, learning strands, general outcomes, and specific outcomes, as can be seen in Figure 2. In other words, the learning strands consist of general outcomes and specific outcomes, and each learning strand has different skills and values, knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes. Consequently, all of the learning strands support the central issue of citizenship and identity.

The Comparison of the Two Structures

When all of the above information is considered, several similarities can be seen in the general structure of both curricula. The two curricula have a similar structure; however, there are differences between the contents of the curricula, such as skills, values, concepts,

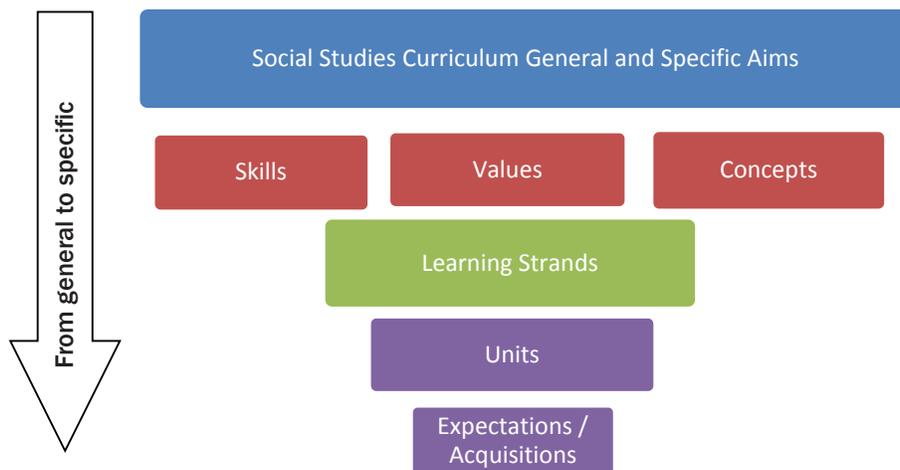


Figure 1: General Structural Design of the Turkish Social Studies Curriculum

units and expectations in the Turkish social studies curriculum; and skills and values, knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes, learning strands, general outcomes and specific outcomes in the Alberta social studies curriculum. Also, significant differences can be seen between two main goals, which are the general and specific aims of social studies in the Turkish curriculum, and citizenship and identity in the Alberta curriculum. In light of these findings, it is possible to say that the core focus of the Alberta curriculum is addressing issues related to citizenship and identity.

The Learning Strands of the Two Curricula

As mentioned above, the two curricula have the same organization in terms of the learning strands, but they have different content, which is suitable to the structure of both societies. This can be seen in the definition of the learning strands of both curricula.

In the Turkish social studies curriculum, the term *learning strand* is defined as “The general structure, which organizes learning in which skills, themes and concepts are seen holistically” (MoNE 2005b, 96).

When the curriculum is examined, it can be seen that learning strands are placed from fourth to seventh grade, both vertically and horizontally (MoNE 2005b). The two-dimensional structure (vertical and horizontal) means that while the learning units are placed through one grade level, they are also put into the different grade levels (fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh). The nine learning strands are

- Individual and Society;
- Culture and Legacy;

- People, Places and Environments;
- Production, Distribution and Consumption;
- Science, Technology and Society;
- Groups, Institutions and Social Organizations;
- Power, Governance and Society;
- Global Connections; and
- Time, Continuity and Change.

Learning strands unify the topics of social sciences in a course. For instance, history, geography, sociology and economics are basic social sciences that inform the social studies, but they may all be represented in a single learning strand. Each of the nine thematic strands encompasses meanings from one or more of the disciplines. Learning strands can be seen as the basic themes of the Turkish social studies curriculum. Strands are placed horizontally, which helps to enhance the spiral structure of the social studies curriculum in each grade; also, learning strands are interrelated in all the grades. As each subject moves into higher grades, it gets more detailed.

On the other hand, a learning strand of social studies in the Alberta social studies curriculum document is expressed as “Learning related to the core concepts of citizenship and identity is achieved through focused content at each grade level. The six strands of social studies reflect the interdisciplinary nature of social studies. The strands are interrelated and constitute the basis for the learning outcomes in the program of studies” (Alberta Education 2005, npn).

When the curriculum is examined, it can be seen that learning strands are placed from kindergarten to Grade 12. These six learning strands are

- Culture and Community;
- Time, Continuity and Change;

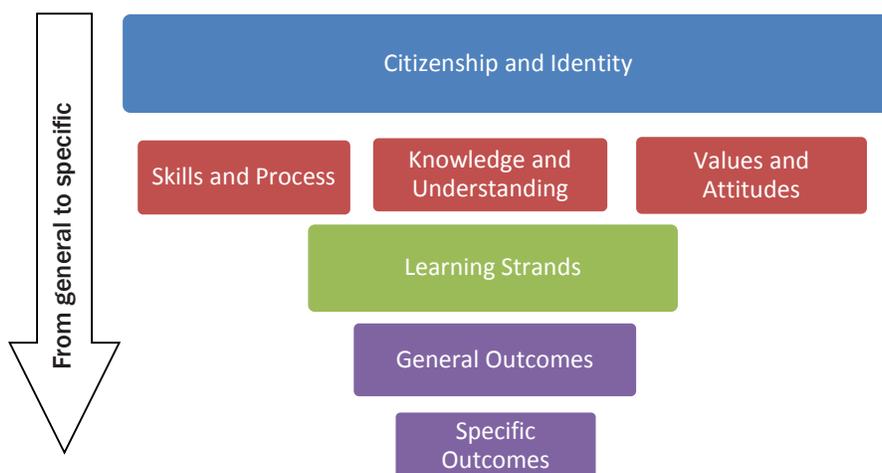


Figure 2: General Structural Design of the Alberta Social Studies Curriculum

- The Land: Places and People;
- Power, Authority and Decision Making;
- Economics and Resources; and
- Global Connections.

Learning strands relate to the Alberta curriculum's central concepts of citizenship and identity. The six learning strands of social studies are based on the interdisciplinary structure. The content of the learning strands is interrelated to global issues and to the social and cultural characteristics of Canada.

The Comparison of the Learning Strands of the Two Curricula

It is apparent that the learning strands of both curricula are similar in name, but there are differences in the number of strands. Although the Turkish curriculum contains nine learning strands, the Alberta curriculum includes only six. However, while the two curricula are different in the number of learning strands, the titles are similar. For instance, the Time, Continuity and Change and Global Connections learning strands use the same title in both curricula. Similarly, Alberta's The Land: Places and People learning strand resembles Turkey's People, Places and Environments; its Power, Authority and Decision Making learning strand resembles Power, Governance and Society; Economics and Resources resembles Production, Distribution and Consumption. Also, Culture and Community is a derivative combination of Individual and Society and Culture and Legacy. The Science, Technology and Society and Groups, Institutions and Social Organizations learning strands

of the Turkish curriculum do not match with learning strands of the Alberta curriculum. However, this doesn't mean that the Alberta curriculum does not cover the topics that are central to the Turkish strands; they may be spread through the existing ones. The reason for this seems to be each country's expectations of its future citizens, which is one of the major aims of social studies globally. Table 1 gives a comparison of the learning strands of both countries.

As can be seen from Table 1, the matching of the learning strands clearly displays the similarities. This has not occurred by chance, but seems to be mostly the effect of the social studies tradition of the United States. Both curricula appear to be very much influenced by the US social studies curriculum as outlined by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in its curriculum standards (NCSS 2010). The highest degree of similarity in terms of content of learning strands was found in the six learning strands in general. Although both sets of strands expect students to learn similar amounts in content, they vary in number, with respect to the country's needs and expectations. This information suggests a *learning strand custom* might have spread from the US to the other countries, as social studies in the US is perceived to have developed a greater theoretical background than the others.

The Role of the Social Studies in the Two Curricula

The fundamental elements under the central and general aims are examined within the title for these two curricula.

No	Turkish Learning Strands	Albertan Learning Strands
1	Individual and Society	-
2	Culture and Legacy	Culture and Community
3	People, Places and Environments	The Land: Places and People
4	Production, Distribution and Consumption	Economics and Resources
5	Science, Technology and Society	-
6	Groups, Institutions and Social Organizations	-
7	Power, Governance and Society	Power, Authority and Decision Making
8	Global Connections	Global Connections
9	Time, Continuity and Change	Time, Continuity and Change

Table 1: Comparison of Learning Strands

According to the curriculum guides (MoNE 2005a, 2005b), the Turkish primary school social studies curriculum consists of three basics—skills, concepts and values—that can be counted as the main pillars of the curriculum.

The first element of the curriculum guidebook, *skill*, is defined as, “the tendency of doing something and being capable.” This is expected to be acquired and mastered in the process of education (MoNE 2005b, 47). Fifteen basic skills are outlined in the curriculum. Nine of these have been accepted in other primary school curricula as well, including mathematics, science, Turkish, arts and others. However, the remaining six are the specific skills dominant in the social studies curriculum. They are also emphasized in the curriculum tables as “skills, which will be directly taught.”

The second element of the curriculum refers to *concepts*, which is the name of the groups according to things, events, people and thoughts about their similarities. Concepts have abstract meaning, and the purpose of the curriculum is to make them concrete; the purpose of teaching concepts is to generalize.

The third element of the curriculum is *value*, which is defined as “beliefs, basic ethical principles or ideas, which are accepted, by most of the community as right in order to ‘maintain the unity and operation of the society.’” Some of the values are specifically emphasized as “values which will directly be taught’ in every unit” (MoNE 2005b, 89).

In the Alberta social studies curriculum document, values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes constitute the three basic roles in the social studies.

According to the curriculum guide (Alberta 2005, 1), ‘Social studies develops the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world.’

The Comparison of the Role of Social Studies in the Two Curricula

When comparing the two curricula in terms of the role of social studies, it appears that skills, values and concepts are defined in detail in the Turkish document, whereas in the Alberta document there is limited information about values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes. Even though the title is different, it is seen that two curricula have very similar roles for social studies that serve the same purposes, such as creating national

and global civil societies. This finding might have arisen from the countries’ expectations of their citizens. Also, it is notable that the highest level of similarity between the two curricula was found in their role statements.

Results and Discussion

This study was conducted with the purpose of comparing the Turkish social studies curriculum, which is implemented in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh grades, with that of Alberta, one of the major provinces of Canada, in terms of values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes. Toward this general aim, and in order to gain a holistic perspective of the study, conclusions are as follows:

1. In terms of the definitions of the two curricula, the Turkish curriculum calls itself a “primary school course,” while the Alberta curriculum document deems it a “study.” From this perspective, the Alberta definition seems to be more comprehensive and broadly stated. Accordingly, Turkish curriculum developers should consider revising the definition of the curriculum, taking the Alberta definition into consideration.
2. In terms of the vision statements of the two curricula, it was assessed that the focus of both vision statements is on their country’s expectations of their younger generations as future active citizens as seen through explicit inclusion of tenets of citizenship education. One of the striking differences is that the Alberta social studies curriculum covers from kindergarten to Grade 12, while the Turkish social studies curriculum covers from the fourth to seventh grades. It might be suggested that Turkish curriculum developers and authorities should reconsider expanding social studies grade coverage.
3. In terms of the general structure of the two curricula, it is found that although the curricula have a similar structure, they also have small differences in the content. Also, significant differences can be seen between two main goals, which are the general and specific aims of the Turkish curriculum, and citizenship and identity in the Alberta curriculum. In light of these findings, it might be recommended that Alberta curriculum developers and authorities revise the central theme of Citizenship and Identity to make it more comprehensive.
4. The learning strands of the two curricula have similar titles, but they are different in the number of strands. The Turkish curriculum contains nine learning strands; the Alberta curriculum includes six.

Though the two curricula are different in the number of learning strands, the names of the strands mostly resemble each other. A possible reason for this is the American effect on both countries' social studies curricula (American learning strands are Culture; Time, Continuity and Change; People, Places and Environment; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups and Institutions; Power, Authority and Governance; Production, Distribution and Consumption; Science, Technology and Society; Global Connections; and Civic Ideals and Practices). The examples provided show how all three curricula seem to be similar, especially the American curriculum and that of Turkey, which clearly reveals the effect of the American trend. From this point of view, it seems that social studies courses tend to create global citizens rather than nationally oriented citizens.

5. In terms of the role of social studies in the two curricula, skills, values and concepts are defined in detail in the Turkish document, but the Alberta curriculum contains less detailed information about values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes. Although the words used are different, the role of social studies in the two curricula is very similar and serves the same purposes. It might be suggested that Alberta curriculum developers and authorities should reconsider this section of the curriculum. This area had the highest level of similarity in the study.
6. The American effect on Turkish and Alberta social studies seems to be obvious; it can be concluded that both curricula are strongly affected by American curriculum. This effect is most clear in the learning strands area of the curricula addressed in this paper. Doubtless, the national expectations shaped their current form, which seems to be addressed through a global framework.

Generally speaking, in the forthcoming curriculum revision in Turkey, the government and curriculum developers may wish to consider highlighting some of the points of the Alberta curriculum. The revised curriculum will also require a successful implementation in the field. Similarly, Alberta Education may wish to study and incorporate certain aspects of the Turkish social studies curriculum.

Further analysis of the curricula could investigate expectations, skills, values analysis and other issues revealed but not addressed by this paper.

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